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THE VITALITY OF CONFUCIANISM

BY CHANG HSIN-HAI

ONE of the most significant movements in the intellectual life of China to-day is the attempt to submit accepted ideas to a new and fresh criticism. Whether that criticism in its present stage of development is sound is perhaps a doubtful question; but the movement, as a whole, towards what we may call intellectual autonomy is certainly salutary from all points of view. I say that the criticism itself has still doubtful value, because it is not inspired by the highest ideals of the critical art. Critics do not as yet seem to have a correct conception of what criticism is, nor how it arouses the intellect from the stupor into which it has fallen, and discovers the permanent truths of the great thinkers of the past. This second function of the disinterested search for truth is undoubtedly the most important function of the critical art, that which gives criticism its abiding value in all aspects of intellectual endeavor. As it is, the Chinese critics to-day are paying an undue amount of attention to the controversial side of criticism. One gets the impression, after reading the large amount of critical material that is being put forward especially in the periodical literature, that the predominant spirit is not the spirit of the inquirer for the truth, but the spirit of Mephistopheles. *Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint*. And so is the Chinese critic. He prides himself on the frequency with which he is able to demolish his opponent's ideas.

It is therefore particularly significant that in the midst of this intellectual rowdyism, of this critical amateurishness, there is a small group of men who, instead of saying that Confucianism is a thing of the past, as many people are doing who think that intellectual originality consists in irresponsible denunciations, are steadily and patiently endeavoring to reveal its essential value and to preserve it as the foundation for the new society that is rapidly coming into existence.

It is a remarkable phenomenon which seems to be common to all religious faiths that as soon as they become established and are accepted by the majority of men as being worthy of whole-hearted devotion, the process of petrification begins to set in. To arrive at the original spirit in which a man like Confucius or Christ taught is perhaps impossible. What may reasonably be expected is that the central points of their teachings should be thoroughly understood. To do this, it is necessary of course that there should be a sufficient amount of intellectual strength and an inquiring mind which is constantly engaged in examining the extent of the validity of these central truths and in seeing how far they are borne out by actual experience. Such is what I may call a living contact. The contact is a living one, because although in a general way we are agreed that these great truths have permanent value for us, we do not merely accept them but are concerned primarily with having an intimate knowledge of them, and adapting their essential phases to our own existence. Under these circumstances, there is little that is formal. It is in the spirit of these great truths that we live and have our being.

Now a living contact is exactly what we have not had for a long time in Confucianism. We have suffered from Confucian formalism as the people in the West have suffered from Christian formalism. No honest person will deny that traditional theology, which survives in varying degrees of severity in the different sects of Christianity with its numerous metaphysical fantasticalities, does not represent the true spirit of the Christian religion. In the same way Confucianism, which at bottom so deeply and so fully satisfies the desires of the human heart, has been encrusted with a rich layer of unessential material which people have taken to represent the genuine spirit of Confucian teaching. But this is an unfortunate confusion; and the important thing to do at present is to see what is involved in this confusion so as to bring to light once more the eternal truths which have given real happiness to generations of men in Eastern Asia.

This is why it is so very significant that a movement has been started to see what there really is in Confucianism, how far and in what respects it has value for the human soul, and the degree

of similarity or disparity which exists between what it really is and what has been traditionally accepted as Confucianism. Traditional Confucianism, like traditional Christianity, does not of course entirely misrepresent the Confucian spirit; but there is no doubt that a great deal of it has deviated from the central ideas and is therefore of little value.

Now it is unfortunate that some of the enthusiastic modernists have their attention fixed only on what is of little value in traditional Confucianism and then say that if such is Confucianism it is clearly useless, and must of necessity be ineffectual either as a religious faith or as an ethical philosophy. A well-known philosopher who has recently been in China did not find anything worth while in Confucianism, except that it has taught the Chinese people how to be polite. And he went on to say that Lao-tse was by far superior to Confucius both in the earnestness and in the profundity of his thought. I do not wish here to go into a discussion of the comparative merits of the teachings of Confucius and of Lao-tse, but the philosopher who saw nothing of value in Confucius has certain prepossessions with which Confucian teachings have little to accord. They happen, on the contrary, to be well supported by the thoughts of Lao-tse. And consequently he raised Lao-tse to an eminence which the Chinese people on the whole are unwilling to grant. In a similar way, those who go to China to vindicate the Christian faith refuse to allow to Confucianism what it really possesses. They either do not have the catholicity of mind to see its strength; or even if they do, they make it a point never to grant too many concessions as it might otherwise induce people to think that Christianity has no reason to be in China.

All that the missionaries are prepared to say, therefore, is that, in certain respects, Confucius succeeded in teaching what Christ taught, but that, even though he did, he was always in one way or another inferior to Christ. Either his tone is not spiritual enough or the delivery of his ideas lacks directness and poignancy. From whatever point of view, Christianity, they argue, is on a higher religious and ethical level, and so under all circumstances it must be taken as the standard. If Confucianism has anything to show which resembles Christianity, then to that extent it is

as good as Christianity. If it has not, so much the worse for Confucianism; for so long as it differs from Christianity, so long is it in a lower order of existence. A number of quite simple-minded people have therefore been made to say that inasmuch as Confucius himself never claimed his teachings to be absolute and final, as Christ did, it is perfectly clear that Christianity must be a more comprehensive religion than Confucianism, that it must possess greater spiritual value for the human soul.

In point of fact, however, this claim to absoluteness, for which the Christians are so very proud of their religion, is not without an element of weakness. Whether that religion is absolute or not is a doubtful question, but the most serious psychological effect which this uncompromising mental attitude produces is the tendency towards narrowness of mind; and narrowness of mind has been responsible for the larger portion of the calamities and unhappy occurrences which mar the otherwise brilliant history of Christianity. The Inquisition, the Index, and the other innumerable forms of persecution which have arisen because of the maintenance of what are called heretic views—all these are as remarkably prominent in the history of Christendom as they are absent from the twenty-five centuries of Confucian teaching. And why? There are a variety of reasons; but are we not warranted in saying that this claim to absoluteness is a very strong reason?

Now Confucianism, instead of teaching that there is a finality in the utterances of the servants of God, tells us that after all the essence of a worthy life is to be found in ourselves. Confucius says, in a characteristic way, that about the utterances of the Divine there is no absolute certainty. We must continue to disagree as to what exactly the divine utterances are. He acknowledges a Divinity, but the divine is what each one must find for himself. It is therefore only wise that we should pursue the divine in a purely positivistic way. We must in other words begin from the human, from our own nature. "If we do not know the human, how are we to know the divine?" There is no gulf between the human and the divine. The divine is realized in the ultimate realization of the human. And each must realize the human through himself. There is thus no need

for the establishment of a distinct class of people who are supposed to possess the power of ministering the divine. Confucianism has no priesthood: the moral and religious life is the personal problem of the individual himself.

What I wish to illustrate is that Confucianism allows the maximum amount of toleration. It does not decry any person because he happens to have another belief; it does not at any rate go to the extent of persecuting him. And it certainly does not say that any one who does not believe in Confucianism is on that account a heathen, one who is beyond salvation and must therefore be in hell after death.

There is of course a definite hierarchy of values in religious and ethical as in other matters, and one religious system may on the whole satisfy human needs more fully than another; but most people have the incurable habit of selecting and comparing a few separate statements and then argue the superiority of one religion over another on that basis. But comparison of disconnected dicta is of all things the most unprofitable in religious affairs. It is a very superficial undertaking, and betrays a mind which, as Mr. Santayana says, knows nothing, loves nothing and is nothing. Religion is what we live by, and what is of account is therefore its spirit, the totality of its essence rather than any separate injunctions or commands. That is why it does not avail anything when the missionaries insist upon saying that Confucianism is inferior to Christianity in this or in that respect. Translators of some of the Confucian texts into English have always been anxious to detach some specific passage and then subjoin it with a similar passage from the Bible which makes upon the reader the impression that Christianity is the better religion.

I had the opportunity many years ago to see what Mr. William J. Bryan had to say of Confucianism; and, as usual, he pointed out that while Christ taught that we should do to others what we wanted others to do to us, Confucius taught that we should *not* do to others what we would *not* have others do to us. In other words, while the fundamental thought is similar in the two cases, Christ is superior to Confucius because His is a positive command while Confucius gives only a negative one. And upon a basis like

this, the Western world has maintained for a long time that the East is negative and the West positive in its teachings. We smile at this kind of rigid antinomy, of course, because such facile distinctions, although making for convenience, are almost certainly superficial. But, besides, in this particular case of Mr. Bryan, he did injustice to Confucianism, like most of the missionaries, because the efficacy and value of a religion cannot possibly be judged from scattered statements, much less from only one of them. Even the Decalogue is but one part of Christianity. What is of importance is the total effect of the entire teaching. So also with Confucianism.

And even from the practical point of view, the attempt to discredit Confucianism by a series of petty skirmishes, as it were, does no good whatever. As long as there are educated Chinese who know something of their own history, these skirmishes will only serve to strengthen their stronghold instead of inducing them to surrender it, which is what undoubtedly the skirmishers aim at. That is why with all the missionary anxiety to Christianize the Chinese people, the more thoughtful ones are ever combining themselves to give greater force to the teachings of Confucius. While they have merely lived in the Confucian tradition for many centuries, they are now beginning to be conscious of it, to reflect upon it, and to strengthen it so as to make the generality of people aware of its great worth and possibilities. In other words, Confucianism is being revitalized, and there is a growing recognition that it must be preserved as the basis for the society now in process of reorganization. All this is taking place with the expansion of intellectual consciousness, but the unskilful tactics of the missionary skirmishers are no less a contributing factor. The more they continue to discredit Confucian teaching, the more they make Christianity unacceptable to the more thoughtful Chinese, because if Confucianism is of as little value as it is often taken to be, we must either say that the Chinese people have contributed nothing of permanent value to mankind, or if they did, it was not because of Confucianism but in spite of it.

Now there is no gainsaying the fact that no single force has been more responsible for what the Chinese have been and still

are than Confucianism. It has produced types of humanity which are worthy of its grandeur and nobility. Chinese history shows distinctly how much the Chinese people owe to Confucian teaching for what they have done, how much they have depended upon it for their happiness and for the realization of the worthy ends of life. And so when they are told how Confucius is defective in a variety of ways, they immediately ask themselves: "Can it be true that Confucius has little value for us? What do the facts of history tell us? Can Confucius be what we are told to be when generations of men have found in him the source of real joy and the guide to an elevated and noble life?"

We can readily admit that the Confucian tradition, as it is, has lost much of its vitality, but this is not the fault of the Confucian teachings themselves but of those who have taken them amiss. I wish therefore to distinguish traditional Confucian from the real spirit of Confucian teaching. What the real spirit is will always, I admit, be difficult to find out. Every age has the tendency to read its own thoughts into the past. To see the past as it really was is one of the most difficult of intellectual undertakings. People are, whether they will or no, influenced to a greater or less degree by current ideas, by the contemporary forces that work upon their minds. Take Christianity, for instance. People think that what they now understand it to be is the true version of Christianity; and yet it is not difficult to show that present-day Christianity is Christianity worked over by the sociological teachings which played so important a part in the intellectual life of Europe and America in the second half of the nineteenth century. The idea of utility, of social service, assumes a more prominent rôle in Christianity to-day than it ever did. What would a man like Jonathan Edwards, to go no farther than the eighteenth century, think of all the sociological crusading with which Christianity seems at present to be completely identified? Where is the sense of sin, when everywhere people are soothed by gulps of frothy optimism? And yet the conception of sin is one of the underlying conceptions of the Christian religion.

So too with Confucianism. Traditional Confucianism no

longer represents the true spirit in which Confucius taught. And although the task of rediscovering the true spirit involves many difficulties, it must be performed if Confucianism is to find a large body of genuine devotees. Traditional Confucianism differs from the true spirit of Confucianism in one of two ways. It either takes the unessential aspects of Confucianism to be its essential aspects, or it loses the spirit of the original through generations of unenlightened and uncritical acceptance.

To take an extreme example of how an original idea may completely lose its force through insufficient mental equipment, for that is what an uncritical acceptance of ideas really amounts to: The Andaman Islanders, the Australian savages, and their cousins in Africa, are now having practically as much Christian teachings given to them as the most intelligent peoples of the world. They are, I suppose, being taught the doctrine of the Trinity, the idea of original sin, predestination, and all the fundamental aspects of the Christian faith. It is of course a great credit to the energy of the missionary: it speaks for his enterprising activities. But the question remains whether all this Christian material which he so carefully prepared will not be reduced by the new believers of the faith into the form of worship which their mental inadequacy has made them accustomed to. Eventually what has been taught as Christianity will turn into something both rich and strange. We shall find it transmuted into one form or another of animism, of totemism, and into other forms of primitive worship. This is as it inevitably must be.

Now exactly the same mental process is at work when the original teachings of a faith like Confucianism come to acquire a totally different significance from what it was really intended to be. Without being perfectly clear of the real import of the Confucian teaching, without the comprehension and appreciation of its total spirit, it was only natural that the people began unconsciously to give a new version to Confucianism. What is really central would be taken as the peripheral, what is peripheral as the central, and so there would be no end of confusion. And such was precisely the case.

One of the most fundamental conceptions of Confucian teach-

ing is the idea of *li*. It is recognized by Confucius himself as one of his five cardinal virtues. Like all the great moral virtues, it has always had a spiritual significance. But *li* has been frequently taken to mean no more than rules of etiquette. One well-known sinologist, with all the Confucian texts before him, could not find a better term for the word in English than "rules of propriety". This is an utter misconception, because rules of propriety, however elaborate and refined they may be, do not go beyond the sphere of rules, and rules are mechanical things, a series of external commands which do not under any circumstance carry the idea of moral value which the word as used in Confucianism implies.

The word, as I said, is an important one in Confucian ethics; and without going into its details, we would do well to find out what its real implications are. It is used frequently in more than one sense; and it is perfectly true that sometimes it is used to mean no more than a group of externalities for the regulation of society, of the relations between one man and another. It sometimes means an elaborate ritualism, to be observed punctiliously at certain ceremonies and festivities. These ceremonies and festivities have their own peculiar rites, as they must, to distinguish themselves from one another. Hence in the *Li Ki*, which has been translated as the *Book of Rites*, we have a very detailed discussion of what the different rites are, how they are to be performed on the different occasions which call for them. Similarly, in other treatises, the authorship of which is however more or less uncertain, we have a number of minute observations on the performance and execution of the elaborate series of mechanical rules.

Then again, the word *Li* has been taken to mean one's deportment, the way in which one should conduct oneself in the presence of others. Different occasions again require different forms of demeanor. Thus in one of the books of the *Confucian Analects*, a work which was compiled by the disciples of Confucius to record what the Master said and did, we have a most amusing picture of the daily life of Confucius. Whether the description is merely a faithful reproduction of Confucius's everyday performances, or whether it is meant also as a subtle

piece of caricature, is a question which perhaps would be difficult to settle. But, at any rate, we are told that Confucius would not eat if the meat that was served to him was not properly cut, was not cut in good geometrical figures! At another time, we are told that Confucius refused to be seated on a mattress if it was not properly laid out. And then the recorder went on to describe the different forms of walking which Confucius assumed in going to and from the Imperial court, and so on. All of which seems to produce the impression that Confucius suffered from an acute form of moral priggishness. That must be the impression which Mr. Bertrand Russell carried away with him, for he told us not long ago that Confucius was a moral prig!

Now this elaborate ritualism does not accord well with the spirit of Confucian teaching as a whole. In a very characteristic remark, Confucius said in a reply to a question on the importance of ceremony that the essential thing is the sincerity of feelings, and that ceremonies, after all, have little value. The true Confucian idea on this subject seems to be this: That one's actions are not the regulated products of the ceremonials but are the expressions of an inward spiritual state or condition. In other words, what Confucius means by the word *li* which is, as I have said, one of the cardinal virtues, is that we should examine into our inner life and try to harmonize its conflicting elements, each of which insists upon going its own way. We have in us an orgy of desires and instincts, a menagerie of wild animals which are engaged in perpetual conflict with one another. Now Confucius says that in order that we might live a worthy life, one in which are realized the highest ideals of humanity, the most important thing to do is to give no chance for the assertion of our ordinary self. For the assertion of our ordinary self means chaos and disorder. What is required is the harmonization and coördination of the conflicting forces so that, instead of being elements of destruction, they may be brought into such a relation as would best contribute to the realization of the higher ideals of life. Now that principle of organization, of harmonization, is to be found in the idea *li*. It is essentially an inner principle, and the order which prevails in society is its physical embodiment. When people are inwardly

at peace, there is no cause for disorder in society. Society is after all what the individuals make it to be, and when they have undergone the necessary spiritual discipline, their actions in society inevitably assume an orderly appearance. It is not society that needs regulation: it is the individual. And so the popular idea of *li* being no more than a series of rules for the regulation of men's conduct in society, fails absolutely to convey the original Confucian sense. Confucius is for from within outwards: the popular idea is for pure mechanism.

That is why Confucianism is essentially individualistic. It says that each person must be his own savior, and to save himself he must cultivate the inner life. The inner life is in continual process of cultivation: the individual must continue to realize in him the highest and noblest ideals of human life. The ultimate product is therefore the man of absolute moral perfection; and who is he? He is the equal of God! It is impossible therefore to deny the existence of the element of the divine which is in Confucianism. All the discussion about whether Confucianism is a religion or not is in a large measure, as it seems to me, futile and unprofitable. The important thing to bear in mind is that Confucianism is more than an ethical philosophy. It recognizes an Eternal Power which it admits to be on a higher level of existence than anything that we find in the human sphere, and the aim of our moral activity is to approach this Eternal Power. There is, to be sure, a peculiar method of approach in Confucianism which makes it different from a religion like Christianity. While Christianity first postulates a Divine Power and then encourages struggling and fallen humanity to attain it through the sense of dependence upon Its omnipotence and Its eternal and everlasting efficacy, Confucianism does not recognize such a dichotomy. It gives no place to the antinomy between the divine and the human, but it says that the divine is realized in so far as one realizes the human. The divine is in the human, not in the sense of its being physically present there, but in the sense that if we fulfil the true law of our being, we discover that then is the divine within us. In this lies the fundamental difference between Confucianism and Christianity. The history of Chris-

tianity is what it is because it believes God to be God, and man, man. Therefore it has need of intermediary agents of reconciliation if man fails to cultivate the religious life in him. And for the same reason, there has grown up a rich literature of casuistry which we do not discover in the entire history of Confucianism. There is in Confucianism absolute autonomy. It has great faith in the power of the individual to give to himself his spiritual salvation. In this world of intellectual and moral independence, I leave the reader to decide for himself which it is that gives him the greater satisfaction, which is the more acceptable of the two.

What I have given is an example of what can be done in the way of rediscovering the permanent truths of Confucian thought. Much that is going on in China under the guidance of a few thoughtful leaders has been of great value, and there can be no doubt that it will prove beneficial to China as well as to the world.

CHANG HSIN-HAI.